

United States District Court

Western District of Oklahoma

Questions and Answers

What is a Pro Se litigant?

If you cannot find an attorney to represent you, you can pursue your lawsuit by appearing without representation or pro se, a Latin phrase meaning “for oneself.” If you file a lawsuit and represent yourself, you are the “plaintiff.” If someone sues you, you are the “defendant.” In either case, you can appear pro se.

Keep in mind that as a pro se litigant, you can only represent yourself and only present your claims and defenses. Under the law, you cannot speak for another person, a company, or other entity such as a club or association that includes other individuals.

When you appear pro se, you must follow the same rules and procedures as licensed attorneys who practice in this court. Generally, judges hold pro se litigants to the same standards of professional responsibility as lawyers.

If you decide to represent yourself, what are some basic things to remember?

It is important that you fully understand your obligation to prosecute or defend your case once it is filed:

First, you should consider the possibility that you may lose. In that instance, *the other side may ask the court to order you to pay their attorneys’ fees and costs.*

- You are required to do your best to present your lawsuit to the court or defend your lawsuit. Unless and until you hire an attorney to represent you, it is your responsibility to do everything necessary to prepare your case for trial. This includes, but is not limited to, responding to discovery requests, motions from the other side, and court orders. You also must be prepared to present your case in court in front of the judge and others.
- Do not expect the court to explain or instruct you about procedures to follow for prosecuting or defending your lawsuit. If you do not follow established procedures, your case can be dismissed for failure to prosecute. If you do not respond to certain motions or orders, then certain facts may be treated as admitted. If you miss a deadline, the court can enter an order without waiting for your response.
- If you file anything with the court, you must give a copy to the attorney who represents the other parties. If the other parties have no attorney, you must give the copies to the other parties. Likewise, the other side must give you copies of anything that it files with the court.

- Sometimes, the parties will attach a certificate of service indicating that the clerk of court has been served with copies of pleadings or motions. This is not necessary. It is your responsibility, not the clerk's office, to serve the other parties.
- You must keep the court and other parties advised of any change in your address or telephone number. If you do not do so immediately, the court may dismiss your case.

How long do I have to file my complaint (statute of limitations)?

The time limit for filing a lawsuit depends on the types of claims raised in the lawsuit. This issue is one of federal and state law and the clerk's office cannot give you legal advice on the issue or tell you how long you may have to file a lawsuit. To find out how long you have to file, you must do legal research. Many federal laws specifically state the statute of limitations period. Often, if the federal law does not include a statute of limitations for the most similar type of claim, you must look to the statute of limitations under state law. Certain organizations provide legal aid or assistance to answer your questions.

I have been named as a defendant in a case, but cannot find an attorney. What do I do?

As stated on the summons you received when the complaint was served on you, you have 21 days in which to file an Answer. An Answer is a written response addressing the claims made in the complaint. This must be filed before the 21 days, or the court may enter judgment against you.

My corporation has been sued. Can I file papers in court on behalf of the corporation?

No. Only people can appear pro se. A corporation is not a "person" for this purpose. In other words, a person who is not an attorney may represent himself or herself, but may not represent a corporation, even if the person is the sole owner of the corporation. The corporation must be represented by a lawyer. You may appear in court with the lawyer for the corporation, but only the lawyer can "speak" for the corporation in court and/or file papers on behalf of the corporation.

Where can I file my lawsuit and file other court papers?

All court papers must be filed at the court in Oklahoma City. The address is:

200 NW 4th Street
Oklahoma City, OK 73102

Can I speak to the judge about my case or have someone in the clerk's office speak to the judge for me?

No. Except for proceedings at court, all communication to the judge must be done in writing. The clerk's office will not speak to the judge for you.

Will the judge answer my letter?

Generally, the court will not respond to letters. If you want the court to issue an order, or provide guidance on procedural issues, you should file a motion that explains your request to the court.

I don't have a computer or a typewriter. Can I write my papers in long-hand?

Yes. If the papers are legible, they may be handwritten. Remember, you will need copies to serve on the other parties.

Can I file my papers electronically?

No, not without an order from the presiding judge.

Why is my case "undergoing judicial review" and what does that mean?

To file a lawsuit you must pay a filing fee of \$400.00. You can ask the court to waive the filing fee by filing the form "Motion to Proceed Without Prepayment of Fees." Before the court rules on the motion, it must look at your case to see if it is frivolous or malicious, fails to state a claim for relief, or names defendants who are immune from suit. In addition, the court must look at whether it has jurisdiction over your case. While the court is looking at these issues, your case is undergoing judicial review. This review can take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months, depending on the court's workload at any given time. Typically, cases are reviewed in the order in which they are filed.

Who can serve my summons and complaint? How is it done?

Anyone over the age of 18 years who is not a party to the lawsuit can serve the summons and complaint. Professional process servers, typically listed in the telephone book, may be hired to serve the summons and complaint. Fees and costs vary with each server. A cost-savings alternative is to have a trusted family member or friend who is over 18 years old serve your summons and complaint. If your application to waive the filing fee has been granted, the clerk's office will serve your complaint and summons through the United States Marshal Service, free of charge. *Summons may not be issued or served, however, until the filing fee issue has been resolved.*

If you are required to make service of the summons and complaint on your own behalf, U.S. Certified Mail is also an option. Simply return a copy of the summons along with the green certified mail card signed by the defendant (or person authorized to accept service on his/her behalf) to the clerk's office for filing. The summons and green card will be filed.

When must I serve my complaint?

Normally you have 120 days from the date you filed the complaint to serve the defendants in your case.

What is a magistrate judge and why has my case been referred to one?

All civil cases in the Western District of Oklahoma are assigned to one United States District Judge and one United States Magistrate Judge. A district judge may refer the case to the magistrate judge to handle during different parts of the case. For instance, a district judge may refer the case to the magistrate judge to handle all issues relating to discovery (for example, identification and exchange of preliminary information, documents, exhibits, or witnesses). Many times, a district judge will refer the case to the magistrate judge for a report and recommendation on dispositive motions, such as motions to dismiss and motions for summary judgment. The magistrate judge will review the motion and issue a recommendation which advises the district judge what should happen with the motion. The parties then have 14 days to object in writing to the recommendation. After the district judge considers the recommendation and any objections, the district judge will issue a decision.

This decision is the final decision by the district court. A party who disagrees with the district court's decision may be able to appeal it to the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals at the end of the case.

Parties may consent to have the entire case handled by the magistrate judge. In such cases, the district judge will take no part in the case.

What are motions?

Either party, the plaintiff or the defendant, may request that the court take specific action related to the case. To do so, the party prepares a formal request, which is called a motion. The party signs the motion, files it (with a certificate of service) and sends a copy to the other parties. The other parties may oppose the motion through an objection that states why the court should deny rather than grant the motion. Any objection must be signed, filed and served on the other parties.

The district or magistrate judge normally rules on motions by issuing a written order. That order may grant the motion, deny the motion or partially grant or deny. The court generally does not schedule hearings for the parties to argue the motion or objections.

How do I get copies of what opposing parties file?

Any party who files a pleading or document must serve a copy on all other parties in the case, or their counsel, and also file a certificate of such service.

What must a certificate of service show?

Any pleading, motion or other paper that is filed with the court must include a certificate of service that states the name and address of each attorney and/or party on who is receiving a copy of the document and the date and method of service.